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ABSTRACT

The rhetorical inventions of Kenneth Burke can help writers gain new perspectives on their topics and can put new life into the process of learning to write. The pentad, Burke's instrument for interpreting actual and potential motives, can help develop lines of thought that might never occur without some such model. Other inventional systems such as exploring the limits of agreement with the thesis, finding the complex in the simple, expanding the circumference, and translation afford opportunities to make writing an adventure in words and ideas. The importance of Burke has two bases: he is the major spokesperson in the United States in our century for a rhetoric grounded in dialectic and he offers a way of getting beyond our narrow concern with linguistic style so that writing becomes action and a matter of interpreting motives rather than being a linguistic process for processing information. (TJ)

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Burkeian Invention, from Pentad to Dialectic

Anyone who has listened to discussions of Christensen rhetoric or sentence-combining must be struck by the sophistication of the methods available for the teaching of style. My purpose here is to offer some inventional models from Burke in the hope of showing how something of the same kind of sophisticated systematization can support the teaching of invention. Burkeian invention attracts me because he provides a model of athleticism in discourse, rather like the schoolboy dialectic of Aristotle and Ramus. For Aristotle, you remember, dialectic was useful as a propaedeutic, as training in nimbleness of thought. Burke has, in an important sense, devoted his career to teaching such nimbleness to our century, helping us particularly to get beyond positive empiricism that finds sense only in the empirically verifiable and to deal with abstractions, opinions, probabilities and intentions, in sum, with those kinds of language that have traditionally been the concern of rhetoric and dialectic as opposed to science. Burke is offering a system, and not just one system but many systems, for controlling and developing the strategies of stance and reference that are the ground of rhetoric.

Burkeian invention has one limitation, however. It is concerned with interpretation, so it has little application to mere objects, unless the user is a pantheist and willing to see a tree or rock as an act of a God or Law complete with purposes, agencies and larger contexts. This limitation, however, gives power to Burke's systems or method in focusing intensively on the interpretive and transformational processes of language and thought. Burke, in A Grammar of Motives takes as his subject the transformations and embarrassments of expression, the confusions and subtleties that both tangle and make possible the acts of reading, writing and rewriting.[1] In particular, Burke gives us a way of seeing the rewriting process as a kind of dialectic in which the writer

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is not merely polishing what he has said, but exploring more fully what he can say.

What I will do here, then, will be to discuss a number of Burkeian models, systems and tricks that seem to me applicable to pre-writing and revision processes.

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The most commonly recognized of Burke's models is, of course, the Pentad, Burke's instrument for interpreting actual and potential motives. For Burke, the pentad evolved as a dialectical device for "rounding" one's perspective, for preventing one from limiting himself to the partialness of a single perspective. Hence the habit in Burke that many object to, the obsession with finding new and often incongruous perspectives. Howard Nemerov once said of Burke that he understood how "reading in" to a poem was as important an analytical skill as "reading out." I should add that at the time Nemerov was doing a numerological analysis of Burke's winter mailing addresses. Such zaniness is not a waste of time, however, for it provides what the classical rhetoricians called "copia," a mass of ideas and attitudes that one can choose between.

In my discussion of the pentad, I will develop an interpretation of the one-stanza poem by Emily Dickinson on the back of your bibliography sheet. I am using a poem because poetry's breadth of self-awareness provides a better demonstration of the potential breadth of Burkeian analysis than would, say, a student paper.

From his slim Palace in the Dust,
He relegates the realm
More loyal for the exody
That has befallen him.

It is a piece of sentimentalism not unlike much of the poetry written in late nineteenth-century New England. It would seem that it was written soon after the

death of Emily's father, almost, I would like to think, as a reflex.[2]

In a pentadic analysis, we try to identify aspects of the poem related to categories of the dramatic situation--act, scene, agent, agency and purpose. The first term is act--what is done here? There is dying; there is grief and there is writing. Dying is rendered in terms of "relegation" and "exody;" grief is translated into "increasing loyalty;" and the poem is written in a blend of theological and legal terms.

The second term is scene--what contexts are given and implied? There is the grave, translated into a palace; there is the home and the mind of the poet, translated into the "realm."

The third term is Agent--Who is acting? There is the "he" of the poem who "is" in a certain sense the poet's father, but also any dying man and Christ. The lack of an antecedent for "he" in the poem permits this sort of abstraction. Then there is the poet; she is also generalized as the "realm," and thus can be seen as any human confronting the fact of death.

The fourth term is Agency--and here writing, dying and loyalty are all media of expression and control, ways of communicating.

The fifth term is Purpose--what intentions are stated or implicit in the poem? The ambiguity of the word "relegate" gives a double "intention" to the father: he is both banishing and ruling the realm. The poet also has ambivalent intentions as the poem articulates both grief and a kind of political rebellion.

Once we identify these aspects and categories, we can get into the much subtler game of the ratios. Burke is very interested in the way the categories relate to each other, how they dominate each other in particular choices of terms that the writer makes as he writes. Given the five terms, there are ten possible ratios: Act-Scene, Act-Agent, Act-Agency, Act-Purpose, Scene-Agent, Scene-Agency, Scene-Purpose, Agent-Agency, Agent-Purpose, Agency-Purpose. In each of these ratios, one term can become an interpretation of the other,

or a metaphor for it.

Going back to the Dickinson poem, we can begin with the Act-Scene ratio--in what ways can we see the scene as an interpretation of the act or acts? This question can help us to read the poem as a dramatization of New England attitudes toward death. It is a commonplace that theological and legal terms and perspectives were often conflated or confused.

Then we can go to Act-Agent--in what way does the action represent or dramatize conditions of mind? This allows us to interpret the poem psychologically. We can see the ironies of the father's condition, and the death-obsession of the poet. The Act-Agency ratio permits us to read the poem as a study in poetry and poetics, or as an analytical and explorative game with language, testing ranges of referentiality. Act-Purpose lets us read the poem as an expression of grief, lets us read death as an expression of frustration with the world of one's personal relations. Scene-Agent allows us to read Emily Dickinson's home and culture as projections of the minds of Emily and her father, making them important character types. Scene-Agent allows us to read cultural and home settings as language, as ways of composing and understanding experience. Scene-Purpose allows us to read culture and home as expressions of intentions, purposes and goals for both poet and father: the hymn stanza reflects both Emily's intense desire for order and an effort to draw on her Church environment as a way of ordering and controlling mind and heart.

And on we can go through this dizzying series of shifting perspectives--Agency-Purpose can make us aware of how Emily registers an awareness that languages in themselves can work out their own intentions or purposes in the lives of people, an awareness that is one of the hidden caverns in Emily's greatest poems. The system can be complicated almost to infinity. In a later version of A Grammar of Motives, Burke found reason to add the term "Attitude" to the pentad as being significantly distinct from "Agent" and "Purpose." This produces a whole series

of new ratios as sources of distinct perspectives. Mr. Kneupper has developed ways to make three-way ratios, and I suppose one's mind could make use of other multiples.

The point I would want to emphasize, however, is the general applicability of this method to any kind of statement or expression--poem, letter, text book, picture, musical composition, garden, and student essay.

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Burke's pentad is the most spectacular of his inventional systems but is best understood when seen against the general background of Burke's concern with dialectic. In the rest of this discussion I will suggest how a number of the other dialectical games that Burke uses in A Grammar of Motives can be used to develop inventional skills to be used in the revision and evaluation processes.

Let us assume that a student has written a rather stock freshman theme with the following thesis: "I decided to go to the University of Xanadu because of its tradition of academic excellence." If he is working with standard rhetoric text like Baker's The Practical Stylist, the student will simply go on to find "interesting and sincere" arguments to support or develop this point. With Burke in his repetoire, however, he will head off on a different track to refine, translate, transform or reverse this thesis and in the process lead himself into a far richer compositional context.

First, he might teasing his sentence a bit, asking what the etymology of the word "Tradition" might have to do with what he is trying to say. If he goes to the OED, he will find a number of contradictory definitions--for instance, in Church history, tradition was the treasonous giving up of sacred secrets. That might get the student thinking in an interesting way about what he expects "traditions of academic excellence" to do for him.

Second, he might try to explore the limits of his agreement with his thesis by making it part of a dialectical process and by finding situations in which it would not hold valid. Would "traditions of academic excellence" be of much

significance in his choice of a nursery school for his child, or a training program in computer programming. Might he not be looking for something else in making such educational choices?

The composition student is usually given one very heavy dose of advice to "simplify." Burke reminds us that the reverse advice is often just as valid--to find the complex in the simple. What complex ideas, motives, purposes or whatever lie behind our student's simple belief in the value of a tradition of academic excellence? Is his belief based on inherited prejudices, on motives that relate more to his social position than to his education? This little trick of forcing oneself to see additional motives can deflect the student from a bad subject to a more promising one.

Another device would be what Burke calls "Expansion of Circumference." Here he is working from a Hegelian dialectic model. A thought generates its opposite or negative, and together they generate a higher synthesis of truth since the mind cannot rest in contradiction. This system might lead our student into a line of thought something like this: a tradition of academic excellence is good, but in what respect is it not good? Then, how can the conflict be resolved? What kind of sentence can be written now? That sentence can in turn be countered, and the process can go on and on until it fails to produce new perspectives or refinements.

Another device is what Burke calls "Translation." We frequently advise our students to be more concrete. Burke again inverts the matter and finds a real value in encouraging the opposite as well--the student does not need only to "concretize" his discourse, he must also be able to "alembicate", in Burke's quaint use of the old alchemical term. This is not a generally appreciated skill in our day and age, but it can help in teaching a control of jargon and other forms of abstraction. In Burke's own writing, the device of translation is the source of a good deal of exasperation for readers who do not recognize the fun involved. In A Grammar of Motives, the relatively innocuous phrase, "Where

wishes are in conflict," is alembicated into "where the sovereign ideality of the 'confluence' or 'balance' or 'panspermia' of all wishes must be translated into the idiom of practical considerations."[3] At another point, "coitus" becomes "a dialectical alchemy whereby acquisition is readily transformed into enlightenment."[4] Our student's sentence could be translated down to "I like the idea of sitting in the same chair as Bertrand Russell," or up to "I came to the University of Xanadu to identify with and articulate from a system grounded in an ambience of individual achievement and social aristocracy." Such sentences may not be graceful as prose, but useful as invention. I can testify to the effort of mind that goes into producing such sentences.

The pentad itself is another such dialectical device. My use of it on the poem by Emily Dickinson should suggest how it can enrich the student's resources for writing by developing his awareness of the contexts and motives from which his initial compositional choices come. There are others as well, full explications of which would take up much more time than I have to spend here. The four "Master Tropes"--metaphor, metonymy, synechdoche and irony--that Burke discusses in the final appendix of Grammar of Motives,[5] become a handlist of topics for analyzing the relationship between ideas and things. Burke also plays at some length with a set of terms he borrows from Coleridge for exploring any dialectical division, any distinction between two terms.[6] Any such distinction can be seen or interpreted as identity, duality, polarity, synthesis, indifference, predominance, succession, alternation and/or substitution. Each term gives a way of seeing a specific substance behind the substantive, in Wittgenstein's phrase, of finding an aspect of the total potential meaning of the distinction. Here, as nowhere else in our pedagogical literature this side of Aristotle, we have a true "calisthenics for the mind."

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Burke is important for two basic reasons. First, he is the major American spokesman in our century for a rhetoric grounded in dialectic. In The New

Rhetoric. Chaim Perelman makes the fascinating argument that argumentation should be grounded in essentially pre-Cartesian ways of thinking about discourse, in the balance of rhetoric and dialectic. It is an arguable position that Burke's major achievement as a writer, rhetorician and critic is his broadening of our understanding of the logic of discourse by returning to a pre-Cartesian emphasis on dialectic, the logic of opinions rather than verifiable terms.

Second, Burke offers a way of getting beyond our narrow and almost obsessive concern with linguistic style. For Burke, writing is action rather than linguistic process, a matter of interpreting motives rather than processing information, a matter of dialectic rather than syntax, and his emphasis provides a counter by which our present methods of teaching writing, our newest methods as well as our older ones, can be improved.

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Footnotes

[1]Kenneth Burke, A Grammar of Motives (Berkeley, Cal.: Univ. of California Press, 1969), p. 21.

[2]The Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas Johnson (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1951), vol. III, p. 903.

[3]A Grammar of Motives, p. 376.

[4]Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (Berkeley, Cal.: Univ. of California Press, 1969), p. 279.

[5]A Grammar of Motives, pp. 503-17.

[6]Ibid., pp. 412-3.